Holland's Brand of Philosophical Counseling

by

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Michael W. Holland, Ph.D., LPC-s, ALDAC, AADC CCDP-D

Holland Counseling of the Ozarks, LLC
Anglican Church International

Introduction

This outline of my brand of philosophical counseling is a revised version of a paper I wrote entitled "Initial Steps Towards Developing a Counseling Theory" for the "Counseling Theories" class I took at the University of Arkansas. I have come to believe that my views fit more into the domain of cognitive/behavioral theory than any other. However, the fit is not exact. The exact nature of the fit is something on which I am still working. Some questions that remain unanswered include, is my brand of philosophical counseling, counseling at all in the sense of counseling studied in counselor education programs and practiced by LACs and LPCs? This, of course, requires an answer to the question of what, exactly, counseling is. Is doing Philosophy not the same as counseling – as I suspect it is not though I am not clear as to why I suspect this – and of so, how and to what extent? Is there an overlap between them say, for example with respect to what is addressed, and if so, where and what is its nature? For example, both cognitive theory regardless of whose version it is to which one appeals involves calling beliefs into question and changing beliefs on the part of the client with the aid of the counselor. Philosophy just is a rational dialectical process by which a person examines their beliefs – calls them into question which is to say honestly considers the possibility they might be false with willingness to no longer accept them as true if the examination does not provide sufficient support for their veracity. I call what follows "philosophical" counseling because I think it is closer to doing Philosophy than counseling as such. Why I suspect this I will address at another time.

View of Human Nature/How Personality Develops

Human beings are processes of being in the world. If you were to ask what is it that accounts for a person to be one and the same person through the radical changes that occur throughout the lifespan, my answer, at least in part, would be that a person is one and the same process of living/being in the world. On this view, then, a person is not a thing that persists through time, but rather, a continuous series of happenings, or occurrences. This process is not complete until it ends, (e.g., death). Consequently, a person is constantly coming-into-being until his/her death, which is to say, being toward death. Seen in this way, a person creates him/herself through the acts s/he commits until their death. Who a person is or what a person becomes, then, is not determined until his/her death. So, in this way, his/her existence precedes his/her essence. This, that existence precedes essence, according to Sartre (1957), is the heart of what existentialism is:

… there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who first exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man, or, as Heidegger says, human reality. What is meant here by existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialism conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he will himself to be after this thrust toward existence.

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also called subjectivity, …" (p.15).

According to Camus (1983), “The principle can be established that for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must determine his action” (p. 6). So a person’s beliefs determine who that person becomes as s/he occurs through life. Beliefs, then, are essential to who a person becomes, what s/he creates her/himself into being.

There is a limitation to what one can come-to-be and it is biology. A person comes-into-being through biological processes. As such, these processes are limits to what s/he can be.

Theory/Major Constructs

I think beliefs, whether they are descriptive or prescriptive, about self, others, and the world determine how people feel and act. Beliefs refer not only to beliefs about a particular situation but also of the nature of the world in general, (e.g., what is real and what that which is real is like and what it is to be human - Metaphysics), how one comes to know what is real and what reality is like, (e.g., what knowledge is and the conditions necessary for having it – Epistemology), and how one ought to act, (e.g., what is goodness, what makes an act right – Ethics). My having a belief about what is real (e.g., that God exists), can play a role in determining how I think I ought to act (e.g., turn the other cheek), and thus, whether I think I acted rightly when I hit someone after they hit me, (e.g., what I did was wrong), and perhaps the kind of person I think I am. Source of Problem (e.g., emotional disturbance, etc.)

The source of the problem is false beliefs about self, others and the world, which is to say, the world. A belief is false if and only if the state of affairs it describes does not match the world. Acting on false belief is dangerous to say the least. If I, while standing on railroad tracks, believe I will be undisturbed by an oncoming train and act on this belief and do not move, then I will die. In the same way, if an alcoholic believes he can control his drinking, then he will blame himself for action for which, at least at first glance, he is not responsible, (e.g., drinking and the results of drinking), and thus falsely think he is a bad person insofar as he drinks despite negative consequences. Thus, he will have a false negative belief about himself that can result in depression thereby making him more likely to drink.

The primary cause of false belief is inauthenticity. Beliefs that are not one’s own, not held to be true on the basis of one’s own reasons for believing them to be true, not the product of rational deliberation, (e.g., beliefs not well thought out) are an inauthentic belief. Inauthenticity is acting on inauthentic beliefs. Inauthenticity, then, is a source the source of false belief in that it is acting on belief not well thought out.

Either a belief is accepted without scrutiny in which case to act on it is to act inauthentically or a belief is accepted on the basis of rational deliberation, i.e., with scrutiny, and thus made one’s own, in which case to act on it is to act authentically. Consequently, all inauthentic acts are the product of unquestionably accepted beliefs the source of which is not the person who acts, (e.g., the source is external to, outside of the person who acts). Therefore, a person who acts inauthentically has an external locus of control, which can be the beliefs of others. Thus, such a person could determine whether s/he has acted rightly by appealing to what others say, (e.g., what I did was wrong because person x says it is wrong, I am a bad person because person x says

I am a bad person). Such a person, then, is left with the task of having to control what is beyond her control, for example, what others think about them, in order to control what she thinks about herself, what she does, and the circumstances in which she finds herself. Inauthenticity, then, in itself is a source of emotional disturbance.

An authentic belief is one that is accepted as true by a person for his own reasons. It is possible for a person to accept a belief for his own reason(s), based on his argument(s) for it being true, and it still not be true. This can occur for one of two reasons, namely, the argument has a false premise and/or bad reasoning, (e.g., the conclusion does not follow from the premises). For example, consider the following argument. Mrs. X's new Ford is a lemon. Therefore, all Ford's are lemons. That all Fords are lemons does not follow from the fact that Mrs. X's new Ford is a lemon. Mrs. X's new car could be an atypical case. Generalizing over an entire class of things on the basis of the atypical nature of one is a kind of fallacious reasoning known as Hasty Generalization. Similarly, that a person will always fail exams does not follow from the fact that the person failed one exam. Nor does the person's being a failure follow from the person's failing one exam, or not writing a perfect term paper. So, fallacious reasoning is another source of false belief.

People, as noted above, tend to attempt to live in accordance with values. Their failure to do so can be another source of emotional disturbance. Questions concerning whether a particular value is a good one to have, the nature of the value, (e.g., what it is), what constitutes living in accordance with a value, and what follows from failing to live in accordance with a value on a particular occasion come into play here. For example, I value being a good student. However, that I am a good student only if I always write perfect term papers is false. Why? What it is to be a good student, (e.g., the definition of "good student"), does not entail that a person is a good student only if he always writes perfect term papers. Again, suppose I only value being a perfect student. Here the question is whether being a perfect student is a good value to have. It might be appropriate to say only being a good or better student is acceptable, (e.g., I must be a good student), and inappropriate to say only being a perfect student is acceptable. On the other hand, that the world will come to an end if I am not a good student on one occasion is false.

Finally, unhealthy biological processes can be a source of problems. If the processes through which input from the world comes, deliberation is done, choices made, resulting in action, is the product of malfunctioning biological processes problems can result. For example, there are some activities people just intuitively see as enjoyable such as playing tennis. Faulty biological processes can rob people of their ability to see these activities as enjoyable and from enjoying them thus leading to their having the false belief that these activities are not enjoyable and cannot be enjoyed by them under normal circumstances. No amount of deliberation can help them see their beliefs are false because they are biologically incapable of doing so. This, then, can lead to depression and in extreme cases suicidal ideation.

Goals of Counseling

The goal of counseling is to help the client come to have authentic true belief. Since, making a belief one's own requires acceptance of it on the basis of one's own *reasons* for accepting it, authentic belief is more likely to be true than inauthentic belief. Consequently, helping someone

come to have authentic belief helps her to establish true belief. Therefore, the focus is on authenticity. However, this still leaves open the possibility of the person having a belief based on bad reasoning. So another goal of counseling is to help the client to see where her reasoning is flawed.

Note that accepting a belief based on one's own reason(s) and acting on these beliefs constitutes having an internal locus of control. So, a goal is to help the client move from being dependent on something outside of them to determine what he will think, feel, and do to depending entirely upon himself through the establishment of authentic belief. It is a process through which the client is emancipated from being cast about in the winds of the opinions of others.

Counseling Process/Change Process/Means by which Goal is Attained

Change occurs through the use of the Socratic Dialectic. It serves as the means by which the counselor helps the client examine her beliefs about self, others, and the world, (e.g., whether they are true, whether the client has good reason(s) to believe they are true, and whether they are logically consistent). The Dialectic is analogous to the "scientific method" and in its most general form it has three stages:

1. Propose hypothesis.
2. Deduce, (e.g., give a valid deductive argument), what follows from the hypothesis.
3. Check what follows from the hypothesis with other beliefs held to be true.
4. If what follows from the hypothesis is not logically consistent with at least one other belief held to be true, then either the hypothesis or the belief(s) that are not logically consistent with what follows from the hypothesis must be given up.
5. If what follows from the hypothesis is logically consistent with all other beliefs held to be true, then tentatively accept the hypothesis as true.

An example taken from one of Plato's dialogues might help to make this process clear, if it is not already. On his way to his trial for impiety Socrates encounters Euthypro who is paid to give lectures in some of which the topic is piety. Socrates asks Euthypro what is piety, to which Euthypro replies that which is loved by the gods. This definition is the belief/hypothesis. Socrates goes on to get Euthypro to admit that the gods disagree (other belief held to be true) and that an action is either pious or impious and cannot be both pious and impious (the principle of noncontradiction, other belief that is true by logical necessity). If the gods disagree, then it is possible for some of the gods to love a particular act and other gods to hate it. Therefore, if what makes an act pious is being loved by the gods (belief/hypothesis) and the gods disagree (other belief held to be true), then it is possible for an act to be both pious and impious. However, it is not possible for an act to be both pious and impious (principle of noncontradiction). Consequently, either it is not the case that the gods disagree or it is not the case that what makes an act pious is being loved by the gods. Reason demands Euthypro either to give up his definition of piety (belief/hypothesis) or give up his belief that the gods disagree. I give this example because it is an actual instance of Socratic Dialectic.

Note that what limits what one can believe is logical necessity, (e.g., being rational). A person is rational if and only if the beliefs he holds to be true are logically consistent, (e.g., there is at least

one logically possible world in which the beliefs are true). Thus, the limiting factor is logical consistency. During the Dialectic beliefs that result in problems, (e.g., emotional disturbance, etc.), are identified and addressed through rigorous examination of the client's reasons, if any, for holding them to be true, (e.g., whether the premises are true and whether the reasoning is fallacious). This can lead to the examination of the client's core beliefs concerning what is real and what that which is real is like, how the client fits into what he thinks is real, (e.g., what is it to be free, to what extent is the client free if at all, and what bearing the extent to which the client is free has on the extent to which, and with respect to what, the client is morally responsible for what he does or has done), what constitutes right action, (e.g., what makes an action right, what is to be valued and to what extent), and why, etc. In this way through the Dialectic topics addressed go beyond addressing particular situations in which the client experiences problems to examining the client's world view including what constitutes psychological health and how it is attained.

My view is cognitive insofar as on my view beliefs are the source of problems. However, my view is not only a method of addressing psychological problems, but also a means of addressing belief systems as a whole. Thus, it allows for the client's becoming at home, as it were, in the world which the client believes to exist because the client's beliefs are authentic.

The Counseling Relationship/Client and Counselor Roles

The Dialectic is a process in which client and counselor collaboratively investigate the veracity and logical consistency of the client's beliefs. Counselor and client are on the same level.

The counselor does not have privileged access to the truth, (e.g., of what beliefs are dysfunctional, for example) and it is not the function of the counselor to bestow truth upon the client as this would defeat the purpose of the client's establishing authentic belief. Rather, the counselor's role is to facilitate the client's development of authentic beliefs and s/he does this by collaboratively exploring the veracity and logical consistency of the client's beliefs by means of the Dialectic. Throughout the process the counselor helps the client see the process as the means by which authentic belief is established for himself. Usually this is not difficult insofar as people are hard wired to be and desire to be rational. However, at a fundamental level, using the Dialectic presupposes being and desiring to be rational. This can be a limiting factor in its use. Insofar as truth of belief goes, helping the client establish authentic beliefs is more or less all the counselors can do. In doing this the counselor might ask the client to give reasons why she thinks a belief is true and help her see whether her reasoning is problematic, (e.g., not logical, which is to say not rational). However, regardless of whether the client's reasoning is good, it is for the client to determine whether to accept the belief based on it as true. Again, the point is to facilitate authenticity. Any attempt to tell the client what to think or how to think defeats the purpose. Finally, if the client is afflicted with a mental illness, the counselor facilitates the client's establishing a view of what mental illness is and whether s/he has a mental illness.

The client's role is to examine her beliefs by means of the Dialectic thereby establishing authentic beliefs. This involves the client's willingness to withhold judgment as to the truth of the belief being examined, (e.g., enter into a discussion as opposed to a mere exchange of

opinion), and to give up beliefs that s/he comes to see as not well founded or not logically consistent with other beliefs s/he hold to be true. Doing this, of course, entails the client's willingness to change even fundamental core beliefs concerning the nature of the world, herself, and her place in it. Developing such willingness is no easy task and can be part of the counseling process. Finally, the client must be willing, or at least willing to become willing, to entertain the possibility of being mentally ill.

It should be noted here that I do not consider the usefulness of having a belief. The question is useful for what? It might be useful a person who has Alzheimer's to deny having it insofar as this would relieve emotional pain. However, it would not be pragmatic to do so. It is better to accept and come to terms with reality than to run from it in my opinion. The client, however, might think otherwise.

Conclusion

In the previous version of this paper I noted that my approach to counseling primarily is the application of Philosophy, (e.g., the Dialectic, Philosophy being a process and not a set of beliefs) to problems encountered in counseling and that for this reason I tended to think of it as a kind of *Philosophical Counseling.* Since then I have questioned whether Philosophy can be used as a kind of counseling at all, whether Philosophy and counseling addressed different subject matter. I think my brand of philosophical counseling addresses much of what is addressed in counseling as such, and, in fact, subject matter beyond the scope of counseling as such. For example, with respect to cognitive therapy, barring assumptions concerning what beliefs are dysfunction or irrational, Philosophy can perform the same function and in more or less the same way as cognitive behavioral therapy. Both address the veracity of beliefs and values and the reasoning on which their acceptance is based. Further I see no reason why many of the techniques used in cognitive therapy, (e.g., having a client identify automatic thoughts, etc.), are inconsistent with the Dialectic, and thus, can be used in addition to it. Further, I think it can function to accomplish goals often set forth in counseling. Again with respect to cognitive therapy, both serve to call beliefs into question for example. Whether my brand of philosophical counseling is a kind of counseling as such, however, I have some reservations, which, as mentioned at the outset, is a topic most appropriately addressed elsewhere. What I hope I have shown here is that Philosophy can have therapeutic value, and I hope I have given a rough example of how it might so be.

Appendix

On the Socratic Method

"Most illuminating is that in the *Theaetetus,* where it is connected with the metaphor of midwifery.

I am so far like a midwife, that I cannot give birth to wisdom; and the common reproach is true, that though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in

me. The reason is this: heaven constrains me to serve as a midwife, but has debarred me from giving birth. So of myself I have no sort of wisdom, nor has any discovery been born to me as the child of my soul. Those who frequent my company at first appear, some of them, quite unintelligent; but as we go further with our discussions, all who were favoured by heaven make progress at a rate that seems surprising to others as well as themselves, although it is clear that they have never learned anything from me; the many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within.

The metaphor of intellectual conception and birth-pangs, as the result of *eros*, recurs in the *Symposium* (206cff), and the *Republic* (490b), where the lover of knowledge is said to 'have intercourse with' reality, to 'bring forth' intelligence and truth, and so to find release from 'travail.' (Guthrie, 124)."

"His [Socrates'] mission was not to impart any body of positive doctrine, but to bring home to men their intellectual need, and then invite them to join with him in the search for truth by the dialectical method of question and answer. He claimed, for instance, that the knowledge necessary for the acquisition of virtue must comprise the discovery of the function of human life as such" (Guthrie, 127).

"They [sophists] held that knowledge (as opposed to shifting opinion) was impossible, for there were no stable and indisputable objects to be known. He [Socrates] demonstrated to everybody that what they [sophist] called their knowledge was not knowledge at all. …, for that of Socrates was based on the unshakable conviction that knowledge *was* in principle attainable, but that, if there was to be any hope of attaining it, the debris of confused and misleading ideas which filled most men's minds must first be cleared away. Only then could the positive search for knowledge begin. Once his companion had understood the right way to the goal (the *method* in its Greek sense), he was ready to seek it with him, and philosophy was summed up for him in this idea of the 'common search', a conception of the purpose of discussion directly contrary to the sophistic idea of it as a contest aiming at the overthrow of an opponent. Niether knew the truth yet, but if only the other could be persuaded of this, they might set out together with some hope of finding it, or at least approaching it more closely, for the man who has rid his mind of a false conception is already nearer the truth. To be Socratic is not to follow any system of philosophical doctrine. It implies first and foremost an attitude of mind, an intellectual humility …" (Guthrie, 129)

"Three fundamental theses of Socrates are so closely related as to form scarcely inseparable parts of a single whole. They are: virtue [excellence, say, at a craft, and in Socrates' case living] is knowledge; its converse, that wrongdoing can only be due to ignorance and must therefore be involuntary; and 'care of the soul' as the primary condition of living well" (Guthrie p.130)."

For Socrates, being virtuous – living well – was to promote one's well being – care of the soul. Thus, the ultimate end of philosophical inquiry was care of the soul by living well – being virtuous or excellence at the craft of living – which is to say well-being. For my own part living well, making yourself what you can affirm at death, is the ultimate goal and, like Socrates, I think philosophy is a, if not the, means to that end. Thus, doing philosophy involves helping

others and oneself live well thereby being well, i.e., well-being. When I taught Philosophy, this is what I took myself to be doing and to be doing now when I engage in it.

- \

"Plato, however much he may have built on to Socratism in the way of positive doctrine, shows himself himself aware of its true spirit when his Socrates says that education does not mean handing over knowledge ready made, nor conferring on the mind a capacity that it did not have before, as sight might be given to a blind eye. The eye of the mind is not blind, but in most people is it looking the wrong way. To educate is to convert or turn it round so that it looks in the right direction *(Rep. 518b-d)" (Guthrie, p.168)*

References

Beck, J. (1995). *Cognitive therapy: Basics and beyond.* New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Camus, A. (1983). *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays* (J. O'brien, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1955)

Ellis, A. (2001). *New directions for rational emotive behavioral therapy: Overcoming destructive beliefs, feelings, and behavior.* Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
Plato, (???). *Euthropro.*

Sartre, J. P. (????). *Existentialism and human emotions* (B. Frechtman, (Trans.). New York: The Wisdom Library. (Original work published 1957)